

The background image is a low-angle photograph of a Black Hawk helicopter on a tarmac. A soldier is climbing the side of the helicopter. Two other soldiers stand in the foreground on the left. The sky is blue with some clouds.

DV

Desert Voice Magazine
Serving U.S. and Coalition Forces in Kuwait

December 20, 2006

Inside the aviation mission of the Puerto Rico National Guard

**“We serve
America, too.”**

**- Sgt. Jose Sostre,
Puerto Rico National Guard**

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On the cover

Puerto Rico National Guard troops do a PMCS on a Black Hawk at Camp Buehring, Kuwait

Photo by Sgt. Sarah Scully

Suicide Awareness:

What you need to know for the holiday season

Information provided by
Commander Kevin Kennedy & Petty Officer 2nd Class Fernando Bobadilla
Mental Health Clinic

In the military, suicide fluctuates between the second and third leading cause of non-battle related deaths annually.

It is our duty to look out for our fellow servicemembers and be a first-responder when someone we know is at risk for self-harm.

It is a person's friends, family, coworkers and supervisors who are in the best position to respond to a suicide threat. A first-responder is a person who first recognizes the threat or risk of suicide and responds to prevent the possibility of suicide.

Stress alone rarely causes suicide. It is the presence of underlying problems that can result in suicidal behavior.

It is important to know the key risk factors:

KEY RISK FACTORS:

- depression
- substance abuse
- talk or hints of suicide/lethal intent and/or previous suicide attempt

Other Common Signs:

- preoccupation with death
- giving away possessions
- relationship difficulties
- impulsive anger and behavior
- legal or financial trouble
- isolation or withdrawal
- performance difficulties

Once suicide risk or personal problems are identified, it is important to expedite

professional help. The acronym **AID LIFE** emphasizes the critical role that first responders have by taking action and getting help for those in need.

A: Ask. Don't be afraid to ask, "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" or "Are you thinking about suicide?"

I: Intervene immediately. Take action. Listen and let the person know he or she is not alone.

D: Don't keep it a secret.

L: Locate help. Seek out someone who can offer assistance such as a chaplain, physician, corpsman, friend, family member, crisis line worker or emergency room staff.

I: Inform the chain of command of the situation. The chain of command can secure necessary assistance resources for the long-term. Suicide risk does not resolve quickly. Effective problem-solving takes time and the suicidal person's chain of command can monitor progress to help avert future difficulties.

F: Find someone to stay with the person now. Don't leave the person alone.

E: Expedite. Get help now. An at-risk person needs immediate attention from professional caregivers.

Responding to suicide risk can help save lives. The earlier the help is provided to an at-risk individual the less likely the problem will spiral out of control. Your quick action could save a life.

For more information on suicide prevention, call the Mental Health Clinic at 430-1893.

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Holiday decorations keep troops' morale high

Spc. Debrah A. Robertson
Desert Voice Assistant Editor

Christmas lights and tinsel, stockings and trees, caroling music and paper snowflakes. It's the holiday season in Kuwait. Although there are no fresh evergreens or drifting snow and fireplaces with stockings all in row, deployed troops decorate with lights and cards and plastic trees.

"This is my first time away from home," said Sgt. Jessica Stafford, the orderly and training noncommissioned officer in charge with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 24th Transportation Battalion. "I decorate so I can feel closer to home."

Whether the decorations were sent by friends and family back home or purchased at the Post Exchange, some servicemembers take the time to uphold family traditions with their deployed family.

"I decorate to boost morale," said Sgt. 1st Class Walter Powell, a

noncommissioned officer in charge of one of Camp Buehring's dining facilities.

Decorating the camp dining facilities and other common areas on camp gives troops a better atmosphere while away from home, said Powell, who is in the Special Troops Battalion, 377th Theater Support Command.

"I definitely think that it boosts [troops] morale," said Stafford. "Every little bit helps people adjust to being so far away from their loved ones."

"It gives them a boost," said Stafford. Making servicemembers feel more at home with their deployed families

is what it's about for many of those putting up decorations in common areas, said Stafford and Powell.

Many of the workers in the camp dining facilities make the decoration for the facilities themselves, said Powell.



Photo by Spc. Debrah A. Robertson

Sgt. Jessica Stafford, the orderly and training non-commissioned officer in charge with Headquarters, Headquarter Company, 24th Transportation Battalion, prepares Christmas cards for her friends and family back home as she enjoys her holiday decorations in her barracks at Camp Arifjan.



Photo by Staff Sgt. Patrick N. Moes

Sgt. 1st Class Richard Degaetano (left) and Staff Sgt. Anthony Doty (right), trim the top of a real Christmas tree placed on the stage at Camp Buehring on Dec. 13, to boost the troops' morale while deployed during the holiday season.

"My mom sent me all [these decorations] because she wants me to feel as comfortable as possible," said Stafford.

So whether the decorations were purchased themselves, sent from loved ones thousands of miles away or simply hand-crafted, holiday decorations bring the holidays to Kuwait.

'We serve America, to

Story and Photos by

Sgt. Sarah Scully
Desert Voice Staff Writer

They might speak Spanish, but they're American troops.

Flying across the desert, Puerto Rican UH-60 Black Hawk pilots and crew chiefs put their experience to use by supporting senior leaders of Third Army/U.S. Army Central.

About 40 Soldiers from the Puerto Rico National Guard are members of 1st Battalion, 111th Aviation Regiment at Camp Buehring in Kuwait.

Tasked with high-profile missions of flying top-ranking generals and command sergeants major to combat zone destinations, the crews have made full use of their

above average flying times and experience, said 1st Sgt. Javier Resto, Co. A first sergeant.

"Our mission is to make things happen and get people in the right place at the right time," said Sgt. Jose Sostre, a Black Hawk crew chief. "It's demanding – every job has its own risks."

The "Islanders" of Company A have a unique trait – they come from a territory, not a state.

In fact, they often run into Soldiers who do not know that Puerto Rico even has a National Guard unit.

"They find it weird because Puerto Rico is not a state," said



Sostre, a Black Hawk crew chief. "But we serve America, too."

America gained responsibility of Puerto Rico's military protection after the 1898 Treaty of Paris halted the Spanish-American War.

More than 10,000 Puerto Ricans now serve in the PRNG.

Some Soldiers joined up because of family tradition, others answered a call to duty after the Sept. 11 terrorist



00' ■ Puerto Rico National Guardsmen patrol the skies over Kuwait



attacks, and many Co. A Soldiers volunteered to deploy and support the fight against terrorism.

“It’s just the motivation they have,” said Capt. Rey Fontanez, Co. A commander and Black Hawk pilot.

“They’re here because they want to be here, and they love what they do.”

Deployed to Kuwait for the past two months, the pilots have had challenges adjusting to the desert terrain.

They’re used to a more tropical climate with significant landmarks, but in the Kuwaiti and Iraqi deserts, they often do not have points of reference – particularly while flying in the dark with night vision goggles to help them see.

“It has been a challenge,” said Resto. “It just takes training and getting used to the environment.”

Soaring above miles of desert, looking over hundreds of Kuwaiti camping tents and seeing the flames of oil refineries in the distance, the Black Hawk crews acquire a different view of the country other Soldiers rarely have a chance to appreciate.

“You get to see stuff most people don’t get to see,” said Sostre. “You

can see things from a different perspective.”

The hard-working, experienced and disciplined Soldiers still have time to enjoy their culture thousands of miles away from home, said Fontanez.

They speak to each other in a Puerto Rican dialect – a mixture of Spanish and Latin American languages.

Only when it comes time to

interact with other units do the Soldiers speak English. They also preserve another part of their culture by cooking native dishes and celebrating holidays Puerto Rican style.

The combat-proven Soldiers and Black Hawks are an important asset to the mission in Kuwait, said Lt. Col. Ben Lacy, 1st Bn., 111th Aviation Reg. commander.

“They’re doing a great job, and we’re proud to serve with them,” said Lacy. “Plus, they have great taste in music and food.”



[Top], from left, Sgt. Joel Delgado, a UH-60 Black Hawk crew chief with 18 years experience in the Puerto Rico National Guard, goes through directions to check the helicopters’ mechanical integrity using a machine simulator with Spc. Carlos Santiago, an avionics mechanic and second generation Guardsman.

[Top center], from left, Sgt. Jorge Rivas and Sgt. Fernando Montalvo, both UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter crew chiefs, stand outside the aircraft as the pilots monitor the controls after landing at Camp Buehring in Kuwait.

[Far left], Sgt. Joel Delgado, a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter crew chief with Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 111th Aviation Regiment, puts on ear protection before starting up the machine simulator designed to make sure the helicopters’ electrical systems are working properly.

The Volunteer:

172nd Soldier deploys to assist S

Sgt. Thomas L. Day

Desert Voice Staff Writer

The finish line was just days away for the 172nd Stryker Brigade. Then, after twelve months in Iraq, they were told their tour would be extended.

Pfc. Kyle Exzabe was stationed at Fort Wainwright, Alaska, with the 172nd rear-detachment, and he thought the deployed troops needed some help. Many of the Soldiers assigned to the brigade had already been redeployed and needed to return to Iraq. Exzabe wanted to go with them.

"They were in need of medics," Exzabe said. "I came to give them a hand."

His deployment was swift. He arrived in September at Camp Taji in the northern section of Baghdad. Immediately, Exzabe was sent out on patrols several times a week, driving a Stryker medical response vehicle.

In Sacramento, Calif., was his mother, Sheila Roson. She did not share her son's gusto for leaving to war.

"We tried to make Kyle really understand what could happen," Roson said of her son's decision to volunteer. "I spent many hours trying

to convince Kyle this was not a good idea, but for every reason I had for him not to go, he had three better reasons why he should."

Kyle Exzabe was born in Hawaii, but has spent most of his life in Sacramento with his mother. "We are extremely close," Roson said. "When

Kyle was in the ninth grade, he would wake up real early on the weekends, because he knew I was awake and he wanted to spend time with me."

It was easy for Roson to keep a watchful eye on her son when he was 14; after he decided he "needed a change of pace" at 24, it suddenly became more difficult.

Career opportunities had lured him through the doors recruiting station.

"I wanted to learn something, get my foot in the door," he recalled. He had been a nurse's assistant for several years, but he wanted to learn more. Exzabe enlisted as a medic, leaving the Golden State for basic training in the fall of 2005.

He arrived at Fort Wainwright while the 172nd was deployed to Iraq. Rear detachment duty didn't suit

"We tried to make
understand what
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Pfc



Courtesy photo

Pfc. [then private] Kyle Exzabe spends time with his son, Jayden, after graduating Basic Training. Exzabe's son has battled various medical problems and his father says he is one of the major reasons why he enlisted.

Soldiers through extended tour

him. "If there's a chance," he told his senior noncommissioned officers,

ke Kyle really
t could happen...
ason I had for him
d three better
should."

heila Rosom,
Kyle Exzabe's mother

"I want to volunteer." That opportunity came in September.

Before he left, he had one loose end to tie. He called Lisa Schmidt, his girlfriend

and mother of his five-year-old son, Jayden, in California. "When I get back, let's settle down, be a family." He was asking Lisa to marry him, and she said yes. The plan now is for Lisa and Jayden to come join him at Fort Wainwright shortly after Exzabe redeploys.

First, Exzabe has to finish washing the vehicle that carried him through north Baghdad, and dozens more that made it through the most dangerous areas of Iraq's capital.

For several weeks in late November and December, Exzabe has

operated in Kuwait, assisting in the redeployment preparation of Stryker vehicles, so the Soldiers who had been in theater for 15 months can go home sooner.

It takes anywhere from three to 14 hours to wash the Stryker vehicles, Exabe said; he works seven days a week.

"He's the hardest worker and the one who shows the most initiative," said Capt. Sam Scott, who is overseeing the vehicle redeployment mission for the 172nd. "He's definitely one I'm trying to promote."



Photo by Sgt. Thomas L. Day

Pfc. Kyle Exzabe helps in the cleaning process of the Stryker vehicles in Kuwait. Exzabe volunteered to deploy to help the 172nd Stryker Brigade when he learned of the brigade's extension in Iraq.

Two brothers, one mission

Alaska National Guard kin together at Camp Navistar for the holidays

Story and Photos by

Sgt. Sarah Scully
Desert Voice Staff Writer

Near the Iraqi border, two Eskimo brothers stand guard in a tower at Camp Navistar in the Kuwaiti desert.

It's the holiday season, but they're far from home.

Unlike many troops who do not have family close by, the infantry brothers will spend their Christmas together while serving in the Alaska National Guard supporting Third Army/U.S. Army Central.

"For me, the holidays have always been the toughest," said Sgt. Pete Kapotak, the 37-year-old brother of 36-year-old Sgt. Wayne Kapotak, both in the 3rd Battalion,

297th Infantry Regiment.

"I'm glad to have family here – we check up on each other."

The brothers are only a year apart in age, and as the middle of nine children, they spent a lot of time together growing up in the rugged Alaska outdoors near their hometown of Dillingham, Alaska.

"Being so close in age gives them a closeness of life experiences you would share with your best friend," said Shireen Kapotak, Pete's wife. "Pete and Wayne will be able to relate their experiences overseas with each other much like when they were growing up."

Their childhood camaraderie easily translated into Army





Photos by Staff Sgt. Patrick N. Moes

(Left) Brothers Sgt. Wayne Kapotak and Sgt. Pete Kapotak serve together in the Alaska National Guard as infantry Soldiers. As the middle of nine children, the brothers spent a lot of time together playing and exploring the wilderness near their hometown of Dillingham, Alaska. Now stationed at Camp Navistar in Kuwait, the brothers are serving their nation while furthering their sibling bond. They said being together during the holidays helps them deal with being away from home.

brotherhood when Wayne convinced Pete to join the Army and continue their adventures.

“We’re real close brothers,” said Wayne. “He wanted to experience it, too.”

They’re both getting to experience the cold weather and small-village atmosphere of Camp Navistar.

Instead of looking out at a river and soaring mountains, all they can see are brown tents and sand.

They said it’s hard to be away from their families, but the Army missions, family and belief in God keep them going.

“I wouldn’t be making it if it wasn’t for my brother,” said Wayne. “He’s one of the reasons I work so hard every day and push forward – he keeps me going.”

Chilly in the desert night air, the brothers keep a watch out for suspicious activity. In the morning, they eat breakfast together and check e-mails from home before going to

bed in separate tents.

Small palm trees grace the doorway of a tent – far different from the huge trees in the Alaska wilderness.

Back home, their wives and children wait for them to return.

“I want him to be here,” said Alyssa Kapotak, Pete’s 6-year-old daughter.

“She prays for me, and I pray for her,” said Pete.

Alyssa and the Kapotak family ask God to keep the brothers safe and alive, said Shireen.

“[I am] sad that I don’t get to see him until next year,” said Donovan Kapotak, Pete’s 8-year-old son. “I imagine him running around and going over walls with ropes.”

Right now, neither of the brothers has much running around to do while monitoring traffic control points.

But in a few months, they will start going out on quick reaction force teams into Iraq – and they will rely on their family’s prayers to help keep them safe.

“I just tell myself I don’t have time

to be scared,” said Wayne. “I just have to be focused and alert and get through whatever danger I find myself in.”

The brothers Kapotak can still relax and bring a sense of humor to their unit – they’re known for imitating Donald Duck’s voice – but when it comes to their work, they have a serious, strict attitude.

“We know we’re here in Kuwait, and we’ve got a job to do,” said Pete. “It’s pretty awesome to be here right next to the border.”

While they’re serving America close to Iraq, they still get reminders of home by receiving care packages filled with dried salmon strips and moose meat.

Just in time for Christmas, Pete will receive a calendar made from pictures of his kids and scenery from his hometown that he can share with his brother.

“It’s a good feeling that he’s here because it’s tough being away from home,” said Pete. “We try to give each other good spirits.”

Kuwait servicemembers celebrate National Guard's 370th birthday

Spc. Sarah B. Smith
377th TSC PAO

Soldiers came to celebrate 370 years of the National Guard in a crowded room at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, Dec. 13.

"Today's birthday celebration reminds us that the National Guard has a long and proud heritage," said Col. Pat Murphy, assistant chief of Staff, National Guard Affairs. "The first militia was formed before the country itself."

Maj. Gen. Thomas Robinson, commanding general, 377th Theater Support Command, talked about the transition from the militia to the National Guard. The term 'National Guard' was first used on Aug. 24,

1824. The National Defense Act of 1916 officially changed the Militia Bureau to the National Guard Bureau.

"On Dec. 13, 1636, when colonists assembled in the first formation and formed the first organized militia, they did so to protect their property, families and way of life," Murphy said. "Today we find ourselves well-organized, well-trained and well-equipped with the same intent – to protect our homeland, deter aggression and defend the freedoms we cherish that so many generations of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen have fought for."

Among the special tributes at the event was a reading of "I Am the Guard" performed by Soldiers of seven mobilized National Guard units

here.

Robinson and the seven National Guard representatives cut the birthday cake after the playing of the "National Guard Song" and the singing of the "Army Song."

The last part of the event was door prizes and giveaways, which consisted of National Guard T-shirts, sweatshirts, soccer balls, footballs and back packs.

"So, as we celebrate the 370th birthday of the National Guard, we remember those that have gone before us, those National Guard Soldiers that have given their all and made the ultimate sacrifice and those that have volunteered to serve during the 370th year following that first formation," said Murphy.



Photo by Sgt. Chris Jones

A Soldier at a podium throws a basketball which has the National Guard logo on it to a Soldier, during a raffle contest at the Zone 6 dining facility on Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, Dec. 13, to celebrate the 370th birthday of the National Guard.

Announcement: New ACC/PCC closing times

The Zone 1 Troop Medical Clinic on Camp Arifjan will continue to open at 7:30 a.m., but the two clinics within the TMC will have different closing times as of Jan. 1.

The Acute Care Clinic will close at 5 p.m., and the Primary Care Clinic will close at 3 p.m.

The ACC is for patients "in need of prompt care, not emergency medical attention," according to Lt. Commander Katrina Leek of the TMC.

Care provided in the ACC consists of "urgent, emergent, non-life-threatening medical care" such as fractures, lacerations, asthma exacerbation, acute abdominal pain, allergic reactions, nausea and vomiting.

Anything requiring emer-

gency medical attention should go directly to the U.S. Military Hospital-Kuwait emergency room.

Also, patients with an illness or injury which could normally be treated at the ACC should go directly to the hospital after 5 p.m., according to Leek.

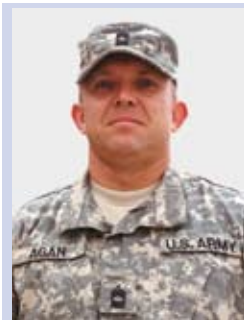
The PCC is where general sick call operations occur, dealing with problems such as colds, sprains, strains, gastrointestinal and dermatological issues.

Sick call hours at the PCC will be from 7:30 a.m.-11 a.m. Monday-Friday, and 7:30 a.m.-9 a.m. on weekends and holidays.

For further information, please call DSN 430-1798.

Just One Question...

What's on your Christmas list?



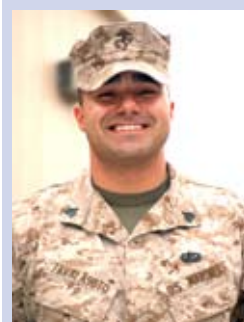
"To be at home with my wife and kids."

Master Sgt. Keith Agan
Actions Officer
Third Army/U.S. ARCENT
C-7
Corinth, N.Y.



"I asked my kids for an iPod. You gotta have good workout music."

Lt. Col. Gary Hilmes
Inspector General
Third Army/U.S. ARCENT
IG
Elizabethtown, Ky.



"Gift cards from a spa for my mother and sister. For me — new running shoes."

Sgt. Alonso Zavalasoto
"Sgt. Z"
Driver
Marine Central Command
San Diego, Calif.



"The strength to make it through one year here with 'Sgt. Z' —all day, every day, just like the holiday."

Sgt. Davis Cavalier
Driver
Marine Central Command
Boston, Mass.



"To be home with my family. To have a traditional family meal —Christmas breakfast and exchanging gifts."

Staff Sgt. Robert Johnson
Third Army/ U.S. ARCENT
C-4 Ammunitions
Ammunitions Supply
Cortland, N.Y.

Hometown Hero



Sr. Chief Gary Daniels, senior enlisted leader, Central Command Deployment Distribution Operations Center

CENTCOM CDDOC insures the distribution of necessary supplies to the proper personnel, among other responsibilities, and Daniels is vital to that mission.

Daniels talks about what he misses about his hometown, Smyrna, Del.

"Attending high school sporting events. I miss the energy the kids display for the pride of their school."

SMA tour sings, signs and dances through Kuwait



Photos by Staff Sgt. Patrick N. Moes



[Clockwise from left] A Soldier sings with the lead singer of the Washington Projects as part of the Sergeant Major of the Army Hope and Freedom Tour 2006 on Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, Dec. 14; two servicemembers hold up a sign for Carrie Underwood, country singer and former American Idol winner, at Camp Buehring, Dec. 13; Carrie Underwood performs in front of servicemembers at Camp Buehring; Darryl Worley performs Thursday night at the Camp Arifjan Zone 6 stage, Dec. 14; Leann Tweeden, sports commentator, jokes with servicemembers at the Camp Arifjan Zone 6 Stage Dec. 14.

